

American Minimalism in Europe during the 1970s

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American Minimalism in Europe during the 1970s (research project supported by the British Academy / Leverhulme Trust's Small Research Grant, September 2014–August 2015)

Introduction

In 1983, Michael Nyman, in his preface to Wim Mertens' *American Minimal Music*, wrote that 'paradoxically, such a quintessentially American and seemingly anti-European music has been largely supported and fostered by European institutions'. How true or false is Nyman's claim? The aim of this research project has been to address the impact of American minimalism in Europe during the 1970s by asking the following questions:

- ◎ How 'seemingly anti-European' (Nyman) was American minimalism during the 1970s?
- ◎ Was Minimalism's rise to fame the result of Europe's interest in – and enthusiasm for – this music?
- ◎ Did Europe become minimalism's 'unofficial sponsor'?
- ◎ Has the importance of Europe been overestimated or underestimated?
- ◎ Is there a danger of applying a Eurocentric perspective on the historical narrative (i.e. to overemphasize Europe's influence)?

Background and Context

It is generally accepted that American minimalism's rise to international prominence took place during the decade between 1968–76. For composers such as Steve Reich and Philip Glass, the 1970s had started with concerts of new works at lofts and gallery spaces in New York City but ended with performances of large-scale works at major venues and concert tours throughout Europe and the USA. What is less clear, however, is the European reception to American minimalist music during this time. To what extent did European performances of minimalist music serve to secure its international profile and popularity? What roles did European commissioning bodies and individuals play in supporting this music and legitimizing its significance both in Europe and back home in the USA?

I asked this question to Reich in a recent interview and he responded as

follows:

‘People have asked me this before and really it’s a misconception – it’s misplacing aesthetics with finances ... The *reception* [to my music both in America and Europe] was the same. Nobody [in the US] had any money in their pockets to pay for it. That was the difference, especially in the 1970s. There was a lot [more] money [during this time] for the arts in Holland, in England, in France.’

This project has revealed, however, that something of an aesthetic sea change towards American minimalism took place in Europe between the early and late 1970s, as summarized below.

The Project

Supported by the British Academy/Leverhulme’s Small Research Grant and conducted between September 2014 and August 2015, the project attempted to assess the impact of American minimalist music in Europe during the 1970s by sourcing, researching and evaluating important archival material relating to the concerts and recordings that took place at this time.

Three research trips were conducted during this time to the Paul Sacher Stiftung, Basel, which now holds Reich’s papers and sketches. The first two visits focused on the reception history to Reich and other minimalist composer’s works. Reviews and articles, mainly on performances and recordings of Reich’s music, but also including Glass, Terry Riley and other minimalists, were sourced at the Stiftung. A number of articles in the German national press were translated. The final trip undertook a more detailed study of the sketches relating to one of Reich’s first European commissions, namely *Octet* (1979). As mentioned on a number of occasions by Reich himself, *Octet* ostensibly displays the influence of Jewish Cantillation singing for its melodic qualities. However, the appropriation of a far more ‘European’ approach is also evident in this work, not merely in terms of its more ‘traditional’ orchestration but also in its harmonic and tonal design. Thus *Octet* can be seen on one level as Reich’s attempt to resolve the American-European dichotomy that had concerned him at various stages during this decade.

Preliminary Observations

In England, France and Germany critics and promoters such as Michael Nyman, Daniel Caux, Hans Otte and Walter Bachauer supported American minimalism. For example, Simon Neubauer writes enthusiastically about ‘the magic of repetition’ (‘Die Magie der Wiederholung’) in a review in May 1972, while by Fritz Piersig talks of the beautiful impression (‘hübschen Eindruck’) created by Reich’s music at the German premiere of *Drumming*.

However, European critics’ responses to minimalist music during the early 1970s were in general less positive. Critics of this music frequently applied terms such as ‘primitive’, ‘boring’ and ‘monotonous’ in their descriptions. This

negative criticism culminated in the mid-1970s with Clytus Gottwald's well-documented diatribe against Reich's music, where he compared it to, in Peter Shelley's words, 'at best banal ... and at worst replicating the coercive mechanics of factory labor', while Helmut Lesch went as far as to say: "Faschistisch" ist allerdings in den Augen sogenannter Avant-garde-Kritiker auch die Musik von Steve Reich' ('Incidentally Steve Reich's music is also considered "fascistic" by the so-called critics of the avant-garde').

Certainly by the early-to-mid 1980s, European reception towards Reich and other American minimalists' music had changed quite considerably. In an article from April 1984 entitled 'The Yanks Are Coming', American critic Alan Rich could say with some confidence that it was a triumphant time for American music in Europe and that many of Reich and Glass's major works between 1976–84 were 'the result of European commissions.'

Why was this the case? Europeans' interest in – and enthusiasm for – American minimalism was partly the result of, as Rich puts it, a lack of European 'hero-composers' at this time, but one can also see in both Reich and Glass's styles a kind of 'Europeanization' taking place in their musical styles.

The final part of my research project relates this shift towards (and appropriation of) more European compositional models by Reich in his 1979 composition *Octet*, and future work will apply this theory to a number of other works by Reich and Glass, composed between 1976–84.

Research Outputs

'From Resulting Patterns to Extended Melodies: *Octet* and the Europeanization of Reich's musical style', in Sumanth Gopinath and Pwyll ap Siôn (eds.) *Rethinking Reich* (OUP, 2016)

'Glass's "Music Theatre of the Mind": from *Einstein* to Pocket Opera', in John Richardson and Jelena Novak (eds.), *Philip Glass's Einstein on the Beach* (Ashgate Press, 2016)